

# Chapter 7

## The Southeast Asian Dimension of Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy

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### I. Introduction

Whether as a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) or as one of the world's first significant countries to demonstrate the importance of the Indo-Pacific region and develop an Indo-Pacific Strategy, Japan's role in Indo-Pacific regional security affairs has become increasingly important. Japan has long adhered to the principle of "exclusive defense," focusing on its military security to avoid raising suspicions of a resurgence of militarism in neighboring countries and to focus on economic development. However, as Japan rose to become an economic power and faced dramatic changes in the international situation, such as the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s, the turmoil in the Middle East in the early 1990s, and the sudden rise of tensions in the Taiwan Strait in the latter part of the same decade, Japan adjusted its foreign policy to ensure its national security and maintain stability in its neighborhood.

Southeast Asia has always been of great importance to Japan's national security. During the Meiji period, Japan regarded it as a "line of interest" for its national interests and put forward the "Southward Expansion Theory" to enter Southeast Asia. After World War II, the Japanese government revealed the Fukuda Doctrine in 1977 to return to Southeast Asia, which had been invaded by Japan, as a gesture of peace and equality. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Abe administration proposed the Abe

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Doctrine, which re-emphasized Japan's importance to Southeast Asia and made it Japan's new diplomatic policy. In particular, the Abe government proposed its Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept in 2016, with Southeast Asia as a target region for its realization.

Taiwan is geographically linked to Japan in the north and Southeast Asia in the south and its northern and southern neighbors naturally constitute Taiwan's external security environment. The DPP government has formulated the "New Southward Policy", which covers a vast geographical area from South Asia in the West to Oceania in the East, and Southeast Asia is located at the center of this area. This article aims to observe the critical developments in Japan's relations with Southeast Asia over the past year that have security implications and analyze their strategic implications and implications for Taiwan.

## **II. Major Challenges for Southeast Asian Countries over the Past Year**

In the past year, Southeast Asia's internal and external security environment has been unstable, with the new pneumonia epidemic still raging in all Southeast Asian countries and threatening health and safety. At the same time, China's threatening show of force in the South China Sea has also posed a gray zone threat to the countries concerned. At the same time, the charm offensive of "vaccine diplomacy" and the "Belt and Road" projects, in contrasts to the face of hegemony, have brought a different kind of negative impact on Southeast Asian countries that cannot be underestimated.

### **1. COVID-19 and China's "Vaccine Diplomacy"**

Since the global outbreak of COVID-19, Southeast Asia has been one of the most severe hotspots of the global epidemic. Half of the countries in Southeast Asia still have vaccination rates below 50% due to the lack of vaccines. As of September 30, 2021, the highest rates were 79.6% in Singapore, 78.32% in Cambodia, 71.84%

in Malaysia, 64.77% in Brunei, 42.18% in Thailand, 37.93% in Laos, 32.96% in Indonesia, 32.77% in Vietnam, and 22.69% in the Philippines.<sup>1</sup>

In this context, China has vigorously promoted its “vaccine diplomacy” in Southeast Asia, with Xi Jinping declaring that he would provide 2 billion doses of vaccines to the world this year and that all Southeast Asian countries have received vaccines from China. The statistics above also show that Cambodia, which has a good relationship with China and has received vaccines from China, has a relatively high vaccination rate. Nevertheless, while China’s “vaccine diplomacy” may be going smoothly, its results are not as good. For example, according to news reports, at least 20 doctors and 10 nurses died in Indonesia between February and June after receiving the Chinese Kexin vaccine.<sup>2</sup> Similar cases have been reported in such other countries in the region as Thailand, with the effectiveness of the Chinese vaccine is gradually being questioned.

## 2. China's Maritime Threat

Following the building of islands in the South China Sea, China has further built military bases on the islands and reefs, creating military pressure on the countries involved. For example, according to a report released in February 2021 by Similarity, a U.S. satellite imagery analysis firm, China has been building military facilities on Mischief Reef, an island claimed by the Philippines but seized by China, since last year.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, China has continued to create gray-zone conflicts with countries in the South China Sea. For example, on March 7, 2021, approximately 220 fishing boats suspected to be carrying Chinese militia converged on the waters around Whitsun Reef in the Philippines, citing “concerns about sea conditions,” leading to

<sup>1</sup> Our World in Data, <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations>.

<sup>2</sup> Raja Ibn Lombarro, Rebecca Henschke, “Coronavirus Vaccine: Dozens of Doctors Still Die after Injection, Indonesia Calls for Third dose of Sinovac Boosted Version,” *BBS Chinese*, July 7, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/world-57731574>.

<sup>3</sup> As ruled by the International Court of Arbitration in 2016, Mischief Reef cannot generate territorial sea, exclusive economic zone or continental shelf. “Satellite Image ‘Shows New changes in Mischief Reef’ China Accused of Advancing ‘Complete Military Base’,” *BBC Chinese*, February 25 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/chinese-news-56198339>.

fears in the Philippines a repeat of the capture of Meiji Reef.<sup>4</sup> In addition, on June 1, 2021, the Malaysian government issued a statement alleging that 16 Chinese military transport aircraft had violated Malaysian airspace on May 31, and the Malaysian air force was forced to take off in response.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. China's "One Belt, One Road" Brings Hidden Concerns

Over the past year, China has continued to promote the "Belt and Road" project in Southeast Asia. However, as has been seen in many countries so far, the project has brought the risk of debt traps, environmental damage, and disregard for human rights in the countries along the route.

Radio Free Asia reported on March 16, 2021, that the massive infrastructure investment under China's Belt and Road project has resulted in huge debt for the Laotian government.<sup>6</sup> The NGO Human Rights Watch reported on August 10, 2021, that the construction of the Lower Sesan 2 Dam, one of China's Belt and Road projects in Cambodia, has displaced Cambodians living around the dam and affected the livelihoods of residents upstream and downstream of the dam.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The Philippines calls Whitson Reef Julian · Felipe Reef (Julian Felipe Reef), China is called Oxbow Reef. This is not the first time that a large number of Chinese fishing boats have stayed in the waters. In 2020, 100 Chinese vessels have also stopped in the waters. "Chinese Ships Assemble Oxbow Reef, Former Philippine Justice Suspected as Prelude to Occupation," *Central News Agency*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aopl/202103240395.aspx>.

<sup>5</sup> "Malaysian-controlled 16 Military Aircraft Invaded Airspace, will Summon Chinese Ambassador to Explain," *Central News Agency*, June 2, 2021, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/firstnews/202106020006.aspx>. In response to the incident, a spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs refuted on June 2 that the Chinese Air Force should conduct "routine training" and "did not enter the airspace of other countries." "Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Wang Wenbin hosted a regular press conference on June 2, 2021," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, June 2, 2021, [fmprc.gov.cn/web/fyrbt\\_673021/t1880857.shtml](http://fmprc.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/t1880857.shtml).

<sup>6</sup> "Laos Grants 25-Year Concession to Chinese Company to Manage Power Grid," *Radio Free Asia*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/grid-03162021152622.html>.

<sup>7</sup> "Human Rights Watch: Belt and Road Dams Destroy Tens of Thousands Livelihoods in Cambodia," *China Central Radio*, August 10, 2021, <https://www.rti.org.tw/news/view/id/2108105>; "Underwater: Human Rights Impacts of a China Belt and Road Project in Cambodia," *Human Rights Watch*, August 10, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/08/10/underwater/human-rights-impacts-china-belt-and-road-project-cambodia>.

### III. Participation and Influencing Factors of Southeast Asia's Foreign Security and Strategy in Japan

Japanese official documents can explain the Japanese government's policy orientation towards Southeast Asia. The annual "Defense White Paper" published by the Ministry of Defense emphasizes the importance of Southeast Asia to Japan every year, calling it "a transportation hub linking the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. Our country, which relies heavily on sea transportation for economic activities and national living materials, is an important area."<sup>8</sup>

On November 16, 2016, at the Defense Ministers Meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) held in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, Japanese Defense Minister Tomomi Inada proposed the "Vientiane Vision" initiative. It was announced that Japan would strengthen security cooperation with ASEAN.<sup>9</sup> Later, the two sides reached the "Vientiane Vision 2.0" initiative in 2019, emphasizing the pursuit of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" concept and the Southeast Asian version of the Indo-Pacific strategy "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" (AOIP) and promoting relations with Southeast Asia under the concept of "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." After Suga Yoshihide took over the leadership of Shinzo Abe in 2020, he continued to promote security relations with Southeast Asia under the concept of "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." After taking office as prime minister, he chose Southeast Asian countries Vietnam and Indonesia for his first visit, demonstrating the importance attached to Southeast Asia with practical actions.

### IV. Japan Expands Support to Southeast Asian Countries

Specifically, facing the impact of the pneumonia epidemic in Southeast Asian countries, the security threat from China, and the political and economic quagmire

<sup>8</sup> 防衛白書（令和3年版）第I部第7節, *Japanese Ministry of Defense*, <https://www.mod.go.jp/j/publication/wp/wp2021/pdf/R03010207.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> "ビエンチャン・ビジョン～日ASEAN防衛協力イニシアティブ～," *Japan Ministry of Defense*, <https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/dialogue/j-asean/vientianevision/index.html>.

derived from the Belt and Road Initiative, Japan mainly adopts the following support measures.

### **1. Japan joins the Ranks of Providing Vaccines in Southeast Asia**

Although Japan's domestic epidemic prevention and control results are not satisfactory,<sup>10</sup> compared with Southeast Asian countries, it is still ahead, and there is still room for support. In addition, China's vaccine diplomacy in Southeast Asia is quite active, so since the global outbreak of COVID-19, Japan, which has a bad relationship with China, has also launched epidemic prevention support to Southeast Asia. For example, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), a government-affiliated organization, has donated medical equipment to Vietnam, which has continued this year.<sup>11</sup> The Japanese government announced on June 25, 2021, that it would provide 1 million doses of vaccines to four Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand, starting in succession from July.<sup>12</sup>

### **2. Japan Strengthens Security Cooperation with Southeast Asia**

For a long time after the World War II, Japan carefully avoided actions with military implication when interacting with Southeast Asia, winning the hearts and minds of Southeast Asia with soft power such as economy, trade, and culture. During the Cold War, Southeast Asia became the front line of confrontation between the East and the West, and even "hot wars" such as the Vietnam War broke out. Therefore, they also have had reservations about foreign forces intervening in Southeast Asian security affairs. However, in recent years, in the face of China's military expansion in the South China Sea, Southeast Asian countries have felt an increasing sense of crisis and have turned to view security cooperation with countries outside the region positively. Japan is promoting security cooperation

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<sup>10</sup> In terms of vaccine coverage, 56.64% of the Japanese have received at least one dose of the vaccine.

<sup>11</sup> "Japan donates anti-epidemic medical equipment to Vietnam," *Vietnam News Agency*, April 10, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/pgQq6l>.

<sup>12</sup> "ASEAN4 カ国に新たにワクチン提供各100万回分," *The Asahi Shimbun*, June 26, 2021, <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASP6T6376P6TUTFK00M.html>.

with Southeast Asia in this context.

### (1) *The Philippines*

Both Japan and the Philippines are treaty allies of the United States. In recent years, Japan has strengthened its military relations with the Philippines. Following Japan's decision to export air defense radars to the Philippine military in August 2020, it will further utilize "government development assistance" (Official Development Aid, ODA) provides rescue equipment used by the Self-Defense Forces to the Philippines.<sup>13</sup> On January 8, 2021, Japan dispatched the large patrol ship "Echigo" (えちご) of the Coast Guard to the waters surrounding the Philippines for joint training with the Philippine Coast Guard.<sup>14</sup> Between the defense/ military departments, from July 5 to 8, 2021, the Japan Air Self-Defense Force and the Philippine Air Force will conduct the first joint exercise, and the content of the exercise will be a humanitarian rescue.<sup>15</sup>

### (2) *Vietnam*

Vietnam had relatively close relations with Japan among the Southeast Asian countries that belonged to the communist camp during the Cold War. It was also the first country visited by Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga after his administration (and then to Indonesia), manifesting the importance Japan has attached to it. On June 3, 2021, Japan and Vietnam held a video conference between the defense ministers. The topics discussed included the docking of the Maritime Self-Defense Force ships and technical cooperation. Profound suspense") China's Coast Guard Law.<sup>16</sup> From September 10 to 12<sup>th</sup>, Nobuo Kishi visited Vietnam personally, and Vietnam became the first country he visited after taking office as Defense Minister. The transfer agreement is an essential step towards supplying weapons

<sup>13</sup> "＜独自＞自衛隊装備、ODAでフィリピンに初供与 対中包囲の協力強化," *The Sankei News*, April 18, 2021, <https://www.sankei.com/article/20210418-QCLRVPYVWFNBXPIB257NQ4LGCI/>.

<sup>14</sup> "海上保安庁新潟拠点の巡視船「えちご」海賊対策のためフィリピンへ派遣," *乗り物ニュース*, January 9, 2021, <https://trafficnews.jp/post/103546>.

<sup>15</sup> "空自がフィリピンと訓練初の2国間、首都近郊で," *Jiji.COM*, July 5, 2021, <https://www.jiji.com/jc/article?k=2021070500675&g=int>.

<sup>16</sup> "日ベトナム防衛相テレビ会談について," *Japanese Ministry of Defense*, June 3, 2021, [https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/area/2021/20210603\\_vnm-j.html](https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/area/2021/20210603_vnm-j.html).

and equipment to Vietnam. On the 12<sup>th</sup>, Kishigian delivered a speech titled “Japan-Vietnam Defense Cooperation and Global Partnership Entering a New Stage” at the Vietnamese Ministry of Defense.<sup>17</sup>

### (3) *Indonesia*

Indonesia is the most populous country in Southeast Asia and the only Southeast Asian country with a “2+2 talks” mechanism with Japan. On March 28, 2021, the defense ministers of Japan and India held talks in Tokyo to discuss future joint military training in the South China Sea.<sup>18</sup> On the 30<sup>th</sup> of the same month, Japan and India held the second “2+2 Talks” and signed the “Japan-India Arms and Defense Technologies Transfer Agreement,” which took effect on the same day.<sup>19</sup>

On July 14, the Japan Coast Guard instructed the Indonesian Maritime Safety Agency personnel to strengthen the Indonesian maritime affairs technology through video.<sup>20</sup>

### (4) *Malaysia*

Malaysia has an amicable relationship with Japan. The “Look East” policy proposed by former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in early 1981 regarded Japan as a learning target for Malaysia’s development.<sup>21</sup> On April 15, 2021, Japan and Malaysia held a video conference between the defense ministers.

<sup>17</sup> “日越防衛相会談（概要）,” September 11, 2021, [https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/area/2021/20210911\\_vnm-j.html](https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/area/2021/20210911_vnm-j.html); “越国防省における岸防衛大臣基調講演,” *Japanese Ministry of Defense*, September 11, 2021, [https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/area/2021/20210911\\_vnm-j.html](https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/area/2021/20210911_vnm-j.html).

<sup>18</sup> “日インドネシア防衛相会談（概要）,” *Japanese Ministry of Defense*, March 29, 2021, [https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/area/2021/20210328\\_idn-j.html](https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/area/2021/20210328_idn-j.html).

<sup>19</sup> Indonesia is the 10<sup>th</sup> target country for Japan to sign such agreements, after the United States, Britain, Australia, France, Italy, Germany, India, the Philippines, and Malaysia. “第2回日インドネシア外務・防衛閣僚会合（「2+2」）,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, March 30, 2021, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/release/press4\\_009033.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/release/press4_009033.html); *Agreement between the Government of Japan and the Government of the Republic of Indonesia Concerning the Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology*, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100169288.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Since 2017, Japan has started to support countries in Southeast Asia and other countries to train maritime security knowledge and skills. Due to the epidemic, it will continue to be conducted by video from 2020. “海保インドネシア職員にオンライン指導,” *Nippon News Network*, July 14, 2021, <https://www.news24.jp/articles/2021/07/14/07906139.html>.

<sup>21</sup> “The Malaysian Look East Policy,” *Embassy of Japan in Malaysia*, <http://www.my.emb-japan.go.jp/English/JIS/education/LEP.htm>.

According to Japanese media reports in June 2021, following the sale of air defense radars to the Philippines in 2020, Japan is also scheduled to participate in Malaysia's bidding for air defense radars shortly.<sup>22</sup>

#### (5) *Thailand*

Since 2005, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces have participated in the “Cobra Gold” series of multilateral military exercises co-organized by Thailand and the United States every year. At the Japan-Tailand Defense Ministers Meeting on May 25 of 2021, Japan expressed gratitude for being.<sup>23</sup> The 2021 “Cobra Gold” military exercise was held from July 10 to August 23. Japan was invited to participate for the 17<sup>th</sup> time, covering cyber-attacks and humanitarian disaster relief subjects.<sup>24</sup>

#### (6) *Brunei*

Brunei is also a claimant in the South China Sea. Brunei has had little military interaction with Japan since its independence in 1984. However, on May 20, 2021, Japanese Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi held a video conference with Brunei's Second Minister of Defense,<sup>25</sup> On June 6<sup>th</sup>, the Maritime Self-Defense Force training ship “Kashima” (かしま) and “Seto Snow” (せとゆき) docked at Maura Port, Brunei, and on the 8<sup>th</sup>, and the Brunei Navy conducted a “Passage Exercise” (PASSEX) in the coastal waters of Brunei and the South China Sea.<sup>26</sup>

#### (7) *Laos, Cambodia*

On June 23, 25, 2021, Japan held video conferences between the defense ministers of Laos and Cambodia to discuss future defense cooperation and

<sup>22</sup> “＜独自＞政府、マレーシアに防空レーダー輸出へ来月から入札参加,” *The Sankei News*, June 19, 2021, <https://www.sankei.com/article/20210619-2K2ZJ72KANOJHADMVVBU6E7ITE/>.

<sup>23</sup> “日タイ防衛相テレビ会談について,” *Japanese Ministry of Defense*, May 25, 2021, [https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/area/2021/20210525\\_tha-j.html](https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/area/2021/20210525_tha-j.html).

<sup>24</sup> “多国間共同訓練コブラ・ゴールド21への参加について,” 日本防衛省統合幕僚監部, July 8, 2021, [https://www.mod.go.jp/js/Press/press/2021/press\\_pdf/p20210708\\_02.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/js/Press/press/2021/press_pdf/p20210708_02.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Brunei's defense minister is concurrently held by the king. “日ブルネイ防衛相級テレビ会談について,” *Japanese Ministry of Defense*, May 20, 2021, [https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/area/2021/20210520\\_brn-j.html](https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/area/2021/20210520_brn-j.html).

<sup>26</sup> “海上自衛隊練習艦隊「かしま」、「せとゆき」のブルネイ寄港,” 在ブルネイ日本国大使館 (日本駐汶萊大使館), June 14, 2021, [https://www.bn.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr\\_ja/20210607.html](https://www.bn.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_ja/20210607.html).

exchanges between the two countries and epidemic prevention and humanitarian assistance. The two sides also expressed respect for international laws and regulations such as the international law of the sea and opposed any attempt to change the status quo by force. In addition, Japan also mentioned cyber security threats with Laos and discussed with Cambodia about Japan’s assistance in cultivating talents for peacekeeping operations.<sup>27</sup>

Table 7-1 2021 Japan-Southeast Asian Defense Ministers Talk

date	countries to be discussed	The essential content of the conversation
March 28	Indonesia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasis on a free and open Indo-Pacific</li> <li>• Respect for international regulations such as international law of the sea</li> <li>• Oppose any attempt to change the status quo by force</li> <li>• Concerns about China’s Coast Guard Law</li> <li>• Promote defense cooperation (including weapons and technology cooperation, docking of aircraft and ships of the Self-Defense Force, joint training, personnel Road Rescue and Epidemic Prevention)</li> </ul>
April 15	Malaysia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasis on a free and open Indo-Pacific</li> <li>• Respect for international regulations such as international law of the sea</li> <li>• Oppose any attempt to change the status quo by force</li> <li>• Worry about the CCP’s Coast Guard Law</li> <li>• Promote defense cooperation (including weapons and technology cooperation, docking of aircraft and ships of the Self-Defense Force, joint training and personnel road rescue)</li> </ul>
May 20	Brunei	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respect for international regulations such as international law of the sea</li> <li>• Oppose any attempt to change the status quo by force</li> <li>• Worry about the CCP’s Coast Guard Law</li> <li>• Promote defense cooperation (including humanitarian aid and epidemic prevention)</li> </ul>

<sup>27</sup> “日ラオス防衛相テレビ会談について,” *Japanese Ministry of Defense*, June 23, 2021, [https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/area/2021/20210623\\_lao-j.html](https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/area/2021/20210623_lao-j.html); “日カンボジア防衛相テレビ会談について,” *Japanese Ministry of Defense*, June 25, 2021, [https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/area/2021/20210625\\_khm-j.html](https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/area/2021/20210625_khm-j.html).

date	countries to be discussed	The essential content of the conversation
May 25	Thailand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasis on a free and open Indo-Pacific</li> <li>• Respect for international regulations such as international law of the sea</li> <li>• Oppose any attempt to change the status quo by force</li> <li>• Worry about the CCP's Coast Guard Law</li> <li>• Promote defense cooperation (including weapons and technology cooperation, humanitarian aid, and epidemic prevention)</li> </ul>
June 2	Philippine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasis on a free and open Indo-Pacific</li> <li>• Respect for international regulations such as international law of the sea</li> <li>• Oppose any attempt to change the status quo by force</li> <li>• Worry about the CCP's Coast Guard Law</li> <li>• Promote defense cooperation (including weapons transfer, capacity building, humanitarian aid, and epidemic prevention)</li> </ul>
June 3	Vietnam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasis on a free and open Indo-Pacific</li> <li>• Respect for international regulations such as international law of the sea</li> <li>• Oppose any attempt to change the status quo by force</li> <li>• Worry about the CCP's Coast Guard Law</li> <li>• Promote defense cooperation (including weapons and technology cooperation, docking of aircraft and ships of the Self-Defense Force, capability building, Humanitarian Rescue and Epidemic Prevention)</li> </ul>
June 23	Laos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasis on a free and open Indo-Pacific</li> <li>• Respect for international regulations such as international law of the sea</li> <li>• Oppose any attempt to change the status quo by force</li> <li>• Continue to promote defense cooperation (including humanitarian assistance, epidemic prevention, and cybersecurity)</li> </ul>
June 25	Cambodia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasis on a free and open Indo-Pacific</li> <li>• Respect for international regulations such as international law of the sea</li> <li>• Oppose any attempt to change the status quo by force</li> <li>• Promote defense cooperation (including the cultivation of peacekeepers, humanitarian aid, and epidemic prevention)</li> </ul>

date	countries to be discussed	The essential content of the conversation
September 11	Vietnam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Announcing a “new phase” of Japan-Vietnam defense cooperation, going beyond bilateral to regional and international Social peace and stability and make positive contributions.</li> <li>• Welcome the signing of the “Defense Equipment and Technology Transfer Agreement”</li> <li>• Emphasis on a free and open Indo-Pacific</li> <li>• Respect for international regulations such as international law of the sea</li> <li>• Oppose any attempt to change the status quo by force</li> <li>• Worry about the CCP’s Coast Guard Law</li> <li>• Promote high-level exchanges</li> <li>• Promote defense cooperation (including cyber security; peacekeeping; weapons and technology cooperation; Self-Defense Force aircraft and ships docking; capacity building; humanitarian rescue; epidemic prevention)</li> </ul>

Source: Author compiled from “National Defense Cooperation and Communication,” *Ministry of Defense of Japan*, <https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/area/index.html>.

### 3. Japan Continues to Support the Infrastructure Construction of Southeast Asian Countries

Japan has rich experience in assisting developing countries to promote infrastructure. Therefore, when facing China’s “Belt and Road” project, Japan, not to be outdone, proposed the “Partnership for Quality Infrastructure” program in 2015.<sup>28</sup> In fact, Japan’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” emphasizes the “pursuit of economic prosperity,” and one of the “three types of connections” it promotes is “physical connection,” and high-quality infrastructure is exactly the reason this link is valued.

Japan adopts a “whole-of-government” approach, in which different government ministries are responsible for support programs in related fields. For example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is in charge of the “Japan-ASEAN Connection

<sup>28</sup> “「質の高いインフラパートナーシップ」の公表,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, May 21, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/u6txdyt>.

Initiative” and the “Asia-Pacific Network Communication Environment Improvement Project Financing” program; the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism has the “Japan-ASEAN Transportation Cooperation” program; Promote the “ASEAN Regional Energy Infrastructure Financial Assistance” program, among others.<sup>29</sup>

## V. Conclusion

Looking at the steady progress of security relations between Japan and Southeast Asian countries today, the historical memory of Japan's invasion of Southeast Asia has faded, and instead, Southeast Asia is paying attention to Japan's development experience. When the related countries in Southeast Asia and China are frequently at odds, Japan is even more welcome to provide support. The global spread of COVID-19 since 2020 has seriously hindered international exchanges. However, the interaction between Japan and Southeast Asia shows that Southeast Asian countries expect Japan to play an increasingly critical role in the region, especially in balancing or diluting China's influence.

From the content of the aforementioned bilateral defense ministers' talks, it can be seen that although China has always had influence in Southeast Asia, the Japanese defense minister has not questioned the CCP's “rights and interests” in the South China Sea, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei, as well as Thailand. The Coast Guard Law reiterates that in addition to opposing the use of force to change the status quo, it is also possible to (unnamed) criticize China and oppose the use of force to change the status quo during talks with Laos and Cambodia, which have good relations with China. It can be seen that Japan's influence on Laos and Cambodia is emerging, and it cannot be ruled out that this is because Japan supports Laos and Cambodia's common neighbor Vietnam in many fields and has a “demonstration effect” on Laos and Cambodia.

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<sup>29</sup> “第23回日ASEAN首脳会議,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, November 12, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/npf6e3sa>.

While China pursues “vaccine diplomacy” in Southeast Asia, it does not give up the intimidation of traditional or non-traditional forces (such as maritime militias). Japan just took this opportunity to enhance its security relations with Southeast Asian countries, including conducting military exercises or maritime security and disaster relief training, as well as selling weapons and equipment to the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and other maritime countries, as well as Vietnam. Since Lianliao, Cambodia, and other relatively friendly Indo-China Peninsula countries are also willing to conduct defense ministerial dialogue with Japan, it is clear that Japan’s influence in the security field over Southeast Asian countries is gradually expanding from “maritime Southeast Asia” to “mainland Southeast Asia.”

The Taiwan government vigorously promotes the “New Southbound Policy,” Among the 18 countries targeted by the policy, Southeast Asian countries account for more than half and as many as ten countries. Neighboring Japan, aiming at the needs of Southeast Asian countries, promotes support and cooperation in the three areas of health, security, and economic and people’s livelihood, and has achieved results. Japan’s experience should be learned from Taiwan. As the relationship between Taiwan and Japan warms up, “Joining Hands Southward” should also be included in the agenda of future bilateral dialogues in due course.